

THREE POEMS FROM ONE FOUNTAIN

HOWARD W. BERGERSON
Sweet Home, Oregon

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

Take a poem and rearrange its words into an alphabetical list; then give this list to a person unfamiliar with the original poem and ask him to construct a second poem out of this material. How similar will the two poems be? Ordinarily, a poet selects and permutes words simultaneously in the creation of a poem, but after the poem is written the poet's activity can be analyzed as two separate activities. The selection of words can be done first, and the permutation of words second; in fact, the second poem can be written by two different people, the Poet of Selection and the Poet of Permutation. If selection is far more important a process than permutation, then one might expect the second poem to be very much like the original; if, on the other hand, permutation is much more important, then the two poems should be quite different.

A pair of poems created in this manner was presented in the May 1969 issue of *Word Ways*. The results of a more elaborate experiment in poetic reconstruction are given in this article. J. A. Lindon of Weybridge, Surrey, England supplied the authors with an alphabetical list of a 338-word original poem, and we independently constructed new poems out of this material.

The three poems are presented below. We independently decided not to imitate the original line-lengths (also given by Mr. Lindon); furthermore, we did not attempt to rhyme the lines. Even so, we found the labor of construction considerable. At the end of our effort, our feeling was that the Poet of Permutation had a very important role to play -- the stockpile of words did not dictate a unique story, but many more-or-less plausible stories. In fact, our task was analogous to that of a person who is presented a Rorschach ink-blot and asked to describe what he sees in it. The reconstructed poems tell a great deal about the personalities of the reconstructors, and ought to be of more interest to psychologists than poets on this account.

USURPER J.A. Lindon

Still plainly can I see myself
 In the parlour of my first remembered home
 Planted like some doll-mascot on a shelf
 Upon the table for the family comb
 To be run through my curls -- bright gold their colour.
 I had on one of those brown velvet suits
 With trim lace cuffs and collar
 And my boots
 Were white with small neat buttons. It is quaint
 But I can see all this; not in the mirror
 Above the mantelpiece, but from a point
 Behind and to the left. Perhaps an error
 Of recollection here, yet I recall
 Watching that tiny figure, now with badge
 (Class One) upon his jersey, late for school,
 Marching alone around the playground's edge
 As he had learnt to do; and one spring day
 Of pale tall-windowed light
 Stamping in temper on his lunch: mincepie
 And chocolate-cream. I see him wait,
 Gloating with inward glee,
 Seated at table by my Auntie Nell,-
 Eyes on the titbit of jam-pudding she
 Is saving till the last; then -- imp of hell --
 The pepper-pot! When first I grew aware
 Of him I cannot say, but it seems certain now
 That always he was there
 Taking the credit and the bow
 While I, his unknown impresario,
 Stood watching from the wings,
 For he was so
 Much more adept at things,
 So bold, so confident, so unashamed,
 And if I pushed in front
 Would vanish, leaving me with cheeks that flamed
 To play my chosen role and bear the brunt
 Of mocked ineptitude. He, always he,
 Took home the prizes, won the girls, enjoyed
 The spending of my money, while for me
 Only the old undignified
 Rebuffs, the failures and the bills.
 So it has always been, and so it is
 And will be till the day when something tells
 Me I must put a final stop to this,
 That now he goes too far, and I shall have

To shoulder him aside, pick up and drink
 The hero's cup myself and, startled, leave
 The stage untenanted, the part a blank.

LAST THOUGHTS OF THE OUTSIDER Howard W. Bergerson

I cannot always and for always
 Will the bright colour of planted things to stop
 In the pale light of the first spring day.
 It is only a while till I leave for the Unknown Front --
 So be still. There has been much to recall:
 My failures, perhaps; my first ineptitude. When small,
 I -- to my credit -- had a home.

Now in inward recollection far I vanish --
 Bow to him (the one chosen figure) as of old.
 He stood so confident -- he, so adept, and he, so bold.
 So, I can see plainly on him the hero's badge
 When spending the money upon bills, and saving gold.

Watching from the tall-windowed parlour above the school
 A class of girls, neat in jersey suits
 And curls and boots, marching around the playground's edge,
 I won myself cuffs; and -- more to the point --
 By gloating on chocolate-cream at the table,
 The brunt of his rebuffs.

At last, for a day, he and his family left their home,
 Leaving the tiny doll-mascot seated on the mantelpiece
 Like some quaint impresario in the now untenanted stage and wings.
 She mocked me with brown eyes --
 For it seems I myself had to do the play!

Then I remembered my role and part was always -- lunch!
 I took my pick of the jam-pudding upon the shelf,
 Enjoyed the mincepie titbit on the table with glee,
 But -- while taking those prizes -- grew aware through the mirror
 Of Auntie Nell behind me, watching.
 Too late! My cheeks flamed! The temper of that pepper-pot,
 So trim with velvet buttons and collar, white lace and comb,
 Was certain hell.

But shall the one his shoulder pushed aside
 See him bear with, be startled of,
 And put up with that stamping imp? Is this it?
 Something tells me, "Wait and see." If he were here now,

He would say it is an error that I have not learnt
That one must drink from this final cup alone.
Yet I can but run, undignified and unashamed,
Till all goes blank.

MALAISE A. Ross Eckler

He seems so adept and confident.
So he has always been an impresario,
And, while gloating on my failures,
Took the credit and won the prizes.
Boots stamping, unashamed of it, he had the hero's role to play!
And I stood still in the wings,
Watching him bow till he had left the bright stage light,
And would see myself chosen for that part.

I, always the small imp with the pepper-pot temper,
With tiny cheeks flamed through with colour,
Remembered when the girls were marching to class
For the first day of school -- and their certain rebuffs.

He pushed me to the playground's shoulder
And, while taking the badge of gold on my jersey,
Mocked my ineptitude.
One can see that it suits him to spring at me like this,
Till I, startled, run far from here.
But this is so undignified.

One error was to leave home and family.
Too late I learnt, it is hell to be alone.
My inward glee grew all the day, when I was home.
By the mirror, I comb my brown curls aside,
And recall neat Auntie Nell, so pale and white in front of the
mantelpiece,
A quaint figure in buttons and old lace
With trim of velvet around the collar and upon the cuffs.
Seated there at the table for lunch, with a jam-pudding and a mincepie,
I enjoyed a drink from the cup upon the shelf above.
Then she put the final titbit of chocolate-cream on the table.
But now that tall-windowed parlour goes untenanted.

If I do not stop spending so much,
My money shall vanish, leaving only the bills behind.
Can I, so plainly aware that saving is unknown, wait for these things?

But see! As of now, I cannot bear the brunt

Of his bold eyes watching point blank.
 Have I perhaps planted something in his recollection?
 It tells him yet more of myself.
 First and last, some now say he will pick me up.
 Must one be always on the edge -- his doll-mascot?

If any reader of Word Ways wishes to try his hand at another reconstruction, we are prepared to offer him a 259-word alphabetical list. Our methodologies of reconstruction were somewhat different, and are outlined below.

HWB: Before actually beginning my reconstruction, I tried for a long time to divine from the word-list what JAL's story was about. Although there were many elements in the word-list that argued against it, the list as a whole suggested one particular story to me, with an insistence that never let up:

An old man is thinking back to when he was a small boy. He was denied certain things he wanted, namely, sweets and good things to eat. When the family -- to which he doesn't particularly belong -- is away, he raids the kitchen. But he is caught by Auntie Nell who had evidently not gone with the others after all.

I fear, however, that there are obscurities in the poem which the reader is unlikely to penetrate -- for example, I was forced to use the words Unknown Front to suggest death, which did not appear in the list.

ARE: I first looked for groups of closely-related words to identify dominant themes; for example, the words (lunch, mincepie, titbit, chocolate-cream, cup, drink, table, jam-pudding, pepper-pot) suggested a meal, and others suggested clothes and a stage performance. Three words (remembered, recall, recollection) implied that part of the story took place earlier. I was astounded to find that the first-person pronouns (I, me, my, myself) appeared 22 times -- nearly seven per cent of the poem! Clearly, a great deal of introspection (and narcissism, coupled with the clothes interest) was present. Third-person pronouns (he, him, his) appeared 12 times. The story had to be built around two protagonists, I and he; the drama would be heightened if the narrator were female. Having done this spadework, I went through the list and looked for natural phrases to be built out of words -- such as Auntie Nell, eyes watching, bear the brunt of, point blank, boots stamping, took the credit, etc. Next, I built up the phrases into groups of two or three sentences each on a single subject -- eating lunch, seeing Auntie Nell in the parlour, being persecuted (by

"him") on the school grounds. In general, my strategy was to include awkward words (doll-mascot, impresario, mantelpiece) into the narrative as early as possible, neglecting common fillers (the, a, but, always, too) which could be easily inserted at the last moment. When all the words had been tucked in somewhere, I rearranged the sentences in as logical a story as possible, selecting a beginning and ending first. By now, it appeared quite clear that the story dealt with a most unhappy and persecuted young girl, who was contrasting her present woes with a more sheltered earlier life.

QUERY

While exploring the arithmetic of word ladders in the August 1968 issue of Word Ways, Rudolph Castown generated a set of 16 four-letter words using only two different initial letters, two different second letters, two different third letters and two different final letters. In his example, each word began with either S or F, had a second letter either I or A, a third letter either N or T, and a final letter either E or S. If all possible letter-choices lead to legitimate words, let us call the resultant set of words a garble group in recognition of the fact that any change (garble) in the letters of a word leads inevitably to another word. Garble groups can be formed of words of any length; furthermore, it is not necessary that the number of alternative letter-choices be the same for each position. For example, BIG, BAG, BUG, BIT, BAT, BUT, BID, BAD, BUD, BIN, BAN, BUN form a garble group with one, three and four letter-choices. How large a garble group is it possible to construct? It is conjectured that if one is restricted to uncapitalized entries (above or below the line) in Webster's Second, garble groups of 50 or more are possible. Smaller garble groups of common words of various lengths would also be of logological interest.